

A stone's throw from Samui exist some great beaches, subterranean caves and a lagoon trapped among limestone cliffs that are part of a marine park in the Gulf of Thailand

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Mu Ko Ang Thong Marine National Park is truly seductive, its charms the dazzling topography and abundant marine life scattered over 42 islands in the Gulf of Thailand.

Situated off the province of Surat Thani, its rich diversity of marine and plant life makes it one of the most frequented spots by nature enthusiasts who arrive there from around the globe.

And rightfully so. The park comprises islands along a north-south axis and studded with steep limestone mountains, most of them reaching up to 400 metres in height fringed by sandy beaches and tropical rain forests.

The park is blessed with fascinating beaches, caves and coral formations. Some islands boast hidden lagoons that meander through small passages surrounded by towering cliffs, making them ideal for water sports and mountain climbing.

Having heard so much about the park, there was a great sense of anticipation as we reached the pier at Bor Phut to board a vessel and tour the marine paradise.

Bo Phut, a fishing village is also the oldest settlement on Ko Samui. Its sandy beach stretching some two kilometres was lined with small boats, trawlers and luxury yachts. There were also some quality restaurants.

I was well equipped for the cruise: salts to deal with sea sickness and sun tan lotion for cover from the blistering sun. We took the Seatran Discovery, a luxury yacht - instead of a trawler as originally planned - for the two-hour ride to the perimeters of the marine park.

We set sail when the sun was at its hottest. On board, the air-conditioned cabin was a big respite from the heat outside, but I frequently ventured out to catch the cool breeze coming off the sea and admire the turquoise waters.

Very few times in life you come across a place that makes you forget yourself, when you just let the opportunity take over. So mesmerising was the scenery that I tried to capture everything on camera. I sat under a shade on the upper deck sipping iced lemon tea, the sea my private sanctuary and an unobstructed view of the Gulf of Thailand.

Approaching the marine park, we spotted a number of mountains. Although the northwestern face of the islands are most prone to monsoon weather which kick up big waves and dump heavy rain to Mu Ko Ang Thong, other parts of the park are sheltered and show healthy coral development, the more common being the elephant tusk, brain and staghorn varieties, while in deeper waters there is a good chance of spotting plate and flower corals.



Mu Ko Ang Thong National Park offers one of the best viewpoints in Thailand. — PONGPET MEKLOY



Kayaking around pristine islands abundant with marine life was fun and full of new revelations.



This picture would prove beyond doubt that I was here, is what this visitor seems to be thinking.



After a long trek up this mountain on Ko Mae Ko, visitors can enjoy the stunning scenery and view of nearby islands.



The magnificent Talay Nai (inner lagoon) has emerald green water and is surrounded by limestone mountain.

After the vessel neared Ko Tai Plaow, the staff began preparing snorkelling and kayaking equipment. The passengers changed into swimming gear and looked forward to the prospect of bumping into exotic coral formations and colourful schools of fish that roam the depths. There was an air of exhilaration as the first batch of snorkellers left by speed boat heading for shallower realms of the sea. As I don't swim and have a phobia of water, I decided to stay on board with others of my type.

Just as the last group of passengers was leaving, I made the most unfathomable decision of my life; I decided to try kayaking after being persuaded and assured repeatedly by the staff that it would be fun and quite safe.



Climbing up the slope is made easier by ladders but make sure you watch your steps.



A group of enthusiastic snorkellers set off for the rendezvous with life under the sea.

Thrown a life vest, I got into it, confident in the ability of my minders that they would pluck me out of harm's way if anything went wrong. Later, I tried to give a reason to this moment of madness and figured that it must have been the beauty of the island and breathtaking scenery that got the better of my fear and made me acquiesce.

After the decision was made I applied myself wholeheartedly to the job at hand, never stopping to think for once what if the kayak capsized. Me and my partner paddled to view huge rock formations and exotic coral reefs near the island on our own, not even bothering to wait for the all-clear signal from the leader of the pack.

Fortunately, the sea was calm. We managed to navigate our kayak without any difficulty. After a while we were joined by a small group and paddled off to a small cave nearby which had what I would call an open top, its only connection to the world outside. Schools of multi-coloured fish were seen swimming, not at all distracted by our presence.

My kayak did hit a few rocks but it didn't flip over, thank god. We spotted soft coral, pen shells, sponge, seaweeds and barnacle along with mackerel, anchovy and squid. I was told that coral don't survive if the water is murky or full of gravel. In these sedentary conditions marine life forms such as sea fans, oysters, clams and mussels, could be seen in abundance on exposed rock faces.

Back on the yacht, I patted myself for the successful maiden kayaking outing that had helped me get over my deep-rooted fear of the sea. Our next stop was Ko Mae Ko, an enchanting island with a lovely lake which is its major attraction.

The sun was still burning down when a speed boat took us ashore Ko Mae Ko. Getting to the lake required a strenuous 400 metres climb atop a mountain. The island has a closed lagoon called Thale Nai or inner lagoon surrounded by cliffs dense with vegetation. The lagoon is linked to the sea via an underground cave. This secluded lake is accessible via a path that leads through rock tunnels to the rim of a cliff from where you get a stunning view of other islands and the emerald waters below. Despite the taxing climb, the terrain gave you a sense of peace and seclusion from the outside world that was occasionally interrupted by the calls of birds and insects.

The marine park is not just rich in life forms under the sea but also a diversity of plants and forests typical of limestone mountains. These plants have adapted well to survive these hard conditions, like the *Dracaena loureiri*, *Euphorbia antiquorum* and the *Morinda* species. There are mangrove forests where visitors can see sandbars and mudflats, like on Ko Mae Ko and on the eastern side of Phaluai Island. These forest areas are well structured with trees large and small, the dominant being species from the *Rhizophora* family.

Reaching the top of the mountain wasn't as backbreaking an ordeal as I had expected. The panorama from there was truly awesome. I will remember Mu Ko Ang Thong for not just its natural scenery, but also the place where I lost my phobia of water.

MORE INFO

- Visitors wishing to stay overnight on Ko Wua Talap should make advance booking at Ang Thong Marine National Park Office, 145/1 Talatlang Rd, Surat Thani city; tel: 077-28-3025 or the National Parks Division in Bangkok, tel: 02-579-0529, 02-579-1842.

The park office is on Ko Wua Talap where bungalow-style accommodation is available. Popular sites include Hat Chan Charat (Moonlight Beach), a viewpoint on a hill and Tham Bua Bok, a cave featuring spectacular stalactite and stalagmite formations.

- Phone number: Seatran Discovery Call Centre & Reservations 06-682-8844; Samui branch 07-7426-000; Bangkok office 02-240-2582.